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Edmund Dulac's 'Snow Queen', in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen and Other Stories* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911).

‘It's Me The Story Is About’: Hans Christian Andersen and the Fairy Tale

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This essay is a revised version of a talk given at the conference 'Hans Christian Andersen: A Celebration and Reappraisal' at the British Library, 9 August 2005.

Opening the first Idbury Arts Festival in 2005, the novelist Philip Pullman – in many ways one of Hans Christian Andersen's natural heirs – gave a talk on the art of storytelling. His focus was on the difference between the novel and the fairy tale, and he located that difference in the sense of the individual self. Pullman pointed out that the youngest son in any one fairy tale could easily swap places with the youngest son in any other; whereas in a novel the youngest son must be a fully realised individual, unmistakable for anyone else. He could not imagine, he said, a successful fairy tale told in the first person, with an 'I' at the centre.

Most people, including Philip Pullman no doubt, could point to stories where this useful distinction blurs, but it is only when you try to apply it to Hans Christian Andersen that it breaks down completely. For with Andersen, the 'I' is always at the centre of the story. For him, the landscape of the fairy tale is the landscape of his own consciousness. Everything his gaze alights on becomes a part of him. It does not matter whether it is a snowman, a toad, a shirt collar, or a philosopher whose cynical shadow takes on a life of its own – the chief characters are always reflections of Andersen himself, and the world they live in is the world of his own highly neurotic and complex self. In the words of the title of one of Andersen's lesser-known tales, 'It's me the story is about'.

This self-centred approach to story was part of Andersen's make-up from the very beginning. When he attended the Poor School in Odense, he used to tell the other children stories he made up. They used to tease him because in these stories, 'I' was always the chief person'.

In both his fairy tales and his novels this remains true throughout Andersen's career. In novelists, this autobiographical urge is fairly common. Even Andersen's hero Charles Dickens put a great deal of his own secret life story into works such as *David Copperfield*. But in fairy

tales, the personal and autobiographical element is almost unknown. It was by infusing the traditional fairy tale with the obsessive self-examination of the Romantic movement that Andersen transformed it into the perfect mode in which to express the truths of his highly strung imagination.

Andersen needed the concealment that the fairy tale offered him, because it fulfilled his need for self-dramatisation without revealing the truths he wanted to keep secret. Andersen's voluminous diaries are incredibly cagey about his personal life. 'What happened within and around me I don't put on paper out of consideration for myself and others', he wrote. As a consequence he remains an essentially mysterious figure. His biographers can't agree if he was gay; they can't agree if he was sexually abused as a child; they can't even agree if he was the truly the son of a poor cobbler and a washerwoman – two Danish writers have published books claiming that Andersen was in fact the illegitimate son of the Danish Crown Prince.

Andersen's autobiography *The Fairytale of My Life* is unreliable and self-serving, though the account of his childhood is vivid. His now underrated adult novels provide much information about his life. For instance the first-person *Improvisatoren* (*The Improviser*, first clumsily translated by Mary Howitt as *The Improvisatore*) is very obviously a direct transposition and interpretation of Andersen's own life experience. He himself said, 'Every single character is taken from real life, each one, not a single one is made up. I know and have known them all.' The graphic scene at the beginning of *The Improviser*, in which the hero as a child is sexually abused by an adult male, has led some of Andersen's biographers to assume – correctly in my view – that Andersen himself suffered a similar experience as a child.

This sort of corrosive secret is exactly the kind of thing that demands to be simultaneously expressed and concealed, in a way for which the indirect, allusive symbolism of the fairy tale is perfectly designed. Andersen's fairy tales tell the story of his inner life, not his life in the world – but they also draw directly on his life experience in a way that is much more open and honest than his autobiography.

Images of Andersen's pauper childhood flicker through the opening scenes of his masterpiece, 'The Snow Queen'. The horror of his mother's alcoholism sears through the little-known story 'She Was No Good', in which he depicts her standing knee-deep in the freezing river for hours on end, fortifying herself with the schnapps he brings her. 'Ah! That's what I needed. It warms me up! It's as good as a hot meal, and it doesn't cost so much. Take a swallow, son – you look so pale, you must be freezing too.' The little match girl is Andersen's mother as a child, sent to beg by her parents, wretched with starvation and cold.

Andersen's half-sister Karen Marie, whom he always referred to as 'my mother's daughter', worked, like his aunt, as a Copenhagen prostitute. He always dreaded her appearance at his door, and took his revenge in his most merciless story, 'The Red Shoes', in which a girl named Karen is punished for her sinful delight in her new shoes by being made to dance until she begs for her feet to be cut off. But he was merciless to himself, too. Story after story shows him all too aware of his own vanity, his hypochondria, his attention seeking, his ridiculous hyper-sensitivity.

Besides depicting himself as every kind of inanimate object from a darned needle to a teapot, and every kind of animal from a duckling to a toad, some of Andersen's most telling self-portraits show him as he really was in his imagination – a shy young student whose only gifts are his affinity with children, his cunning way with a pair of scissors, and his love of storytelling.

Andersen's first pamphlet of four fairy tales, *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn*, appeared in 1835, the same year as *The Improviser*. In the novel Andersen introduces himself into the narrative as a Danish traveller and describes himself as he actually would have appeared to a stranger: 'a foreign gentleman, tolerably tall and somewhat pale, with strong features, and dressed in a blue frock-coat'.

When he introduces himself into one of those first four fairy tales, 'Little Ida's Flowers', it is in an idealised form that represents not how others saw him but how he saw himself: the eternal student who lived not in the real world but in his imagination, who is loved by Little Ida because 'he used to tell her wonderful stories and could cut amazing pictures out of a piece of paper – hearts with little dancers in them, flowers and great castles with doors that opened.'

This student reappears in 'The Goblin at the Grocer's', living above the grocer's shop and choosing a torn-up book of poetry over the chunk of cheese that has been wrapped in it. He is there in 'Dance, Dolly, Dance', singing a nonsense song to a three-year-old girl. He is there in one of Andersen's darkest stories, the bitter doppelgänger tale in which a shadow surpasses its former master and tells him, 'You must let everybody call you "Shadow", and never tell anyone that you were once a man; and once a year, when I sit in the sun on the balcony to show myself to the people, you must lie there at my feet like a good shadow.' And he is there in the very last story of all, the mordant 'Auntie Toothache'.

The other three stories in that first little volume of tales are quite different from 'Little Ida's Flowers'. While that is wholly original, the other three are all retold folktales. One of these, 'Little Claus and Big Claus', is probably the least autobiographical of all Andersen's fairy tales. It is a fairly straight retelling of the widespread folktale, 'The Rich Peasant and the Poor Peasant' – no. I535 in the standard Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification of *The Types of International Folktales*. Andersen leaves very little personal mark on this tale, apart from a certain swing and bounce to the writing, and the editing out of the earthier sexual elements of the traditional tale; he would exercise a similar censorship on other retold tales, such as 'Clod Hans'.

'The Tinderbox', however, is utterly transformed by Andersen's particular sensibility. This story is a version of the tale known to folklorists as 'The Spirit in the Blue Light' (ATU 562), after the Grimms' version, 'The Blue Light'. It is essentially a westernised take on the story of 'Aladdin' (ATU 561). And it was this story, 'Aladdin', that more than any other caught and held Hans Christian Andersen's imagination. Throughout his life he identified himself with its hero. He was first told the story by his father, who possessed a collection of stories from the *Arabian Nights*, and its story of a poor boy made good served as a model for what Andersen called 'the fairytale of my life'.

He also closely identified with the hero of the Romantic 1805 play *Aladdin* by Adam Oehlenschläger, in which Aladdin turns out after all to be the son of an emir, and not of a poor tailor. In his diary entry for Monday 19 December 1825, when he was 20, Andersen asks, 'Is it going to be for me as it was for Aladdin?' He revisited the Aladdin theme as late as his last novel, *Lucky Peer*, published in 1870.

But the hero of 'The Tinderbox' is not simply an expression of Andersen's own self-image; he is also a portrait of Andersen's father, the shoemaker Hans Andersen. Hans never seems to have made much of a success of his cobbler's business, and in 1812 he enrolled in the army as a place-man, accepting money to enlist instead of a wealthy conscript. He served for two years, and while doing so may himself have heard the folktale that is the basis of 'The Tinderbox', with its displaced soldier hero. The soldier returning from the wars in Andersen's version is surely a tribute to his father, coming home a broken man from the armies gathered to fight for Napoleon, with failing health and failing hopes, but without any magic lamp to solve his problems.

In a note to his first pamphlet of fairy tales, Andersen wrote, 'The first three of the tales I had heard as a child, either in the spinning room or during the harvesting of the hops.' These tales are 'The Tinderbox', 'Little Claus and Big Claus', and 'The Princess on the Pea'.

In his essay 'Hans Christian Andersen's Use of Folktales', Bengt Holbek argues that, while Andersen only mentions hearing folktales from female narrators, he almost certainly heard tales such as 'The Tinderbox' and 'The Travelling Companion' from a male narrator. This is because in Denmark there was a gender divide in storytelling. Men generally told stories with male heroes, such as 'The Tinderbox', and women told stories with female heroines, such as 'The Wild Swans'. Holbek suggests Andersen's father, Hans, as the most likely source of the typically male stories.

One of the ways in which Andersen resists tradition is in his willingness to tell both types of tale. Even in his own day, the fusion of male and female characteristics in Andersen's personality and his writing caused comment. In his 1869 article – the first serious criticism of Andersen's fairy tales – the critic Georg Brandes writes, 'I know no poet whose mind is more devoid of sexual distinctions, whose talent is less of a nature to betray a defined sex, than Andersen's.' And he continues, 'A poet is a man who is at the same time a woman.'

This strong feminine element in Andersen's mentality is demonstrated in the fourth story in that first book, 'The Princess on the Pea'. The princess who suffers agonies from the presence of a single pea beneath her bed is absolutely a self-portrait of the author, whose ultra-sensitive antennae could detect a pea of criticism beneath twenty mattresses and twenty featherbeds of praise.

It did not seem strange to Andersen to depict himself as female, and in fact many of his most deeply felt self-projections are onto female characters, such as the Little Mermaid, the darning needle, and the china shepherdess in 'The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep'. As Dag Heede pointed out at the Hans Christian Andersen conference at the British Library in 2005, Andersen identified with Cinderella just as fully as he did with Aladdin.

The accepted number of Andersen's fairy tales is 156. Of these, only eight are retold folktales: 'The Tinderbox', 'Little Claus and Big Claus', 'The Princess on the Pea', 'The Travelling Companion', 'The Wild Swans', 'The Swineherd', 'What Father Does Is Always Right', and 'Clod Hans'.

Andersen is scrupulous in telling us when he is retelling a folktale or basing a story on a Danish legend. His notes to the stories tell us that 'The Evil King is an old legend and is one of the first stories I wrote', or that 'Clod Hans is a Danish folktale, very freely retold. It is quite singular among my later stories, practically all of which are of my own invention.' Other stories where he acknowledges a folklore base include 'The Pixy and the Gardener's Wife', 'Something', 'The Bell Deep', 'The Garden of Eden', and 'The Girl Who Stepped on Bread'.

In his 1837 preface, Andersen wrote, 'In my childhood I loved to listen to fairytales and stories. Many of them are still very alive in my memory. Certain of them seem to me to be Danish in origin, for I have never heard them anywhere else. These I have told in my own way: where I thought it fitting, I have changed them and let imagination freshen the colours in the picture that had begun to fade.'

Andersen recognised the difference between traditional fairy tales and legends – what folklorists call *Märchen* and *Sagen* – as he shows both in the notes to his published tales and in an article he wrote for the *Riverside Magazine* in October 1870 entitled 'Danish Popular Legends'.

There is no doubt that the traditional tales he heard as a child, whether from his father or the women in the spinning room of the local pauper asylum, penetrated his imagination to its depths. In the fairy tales told him by the elderly women in the Odense workhouse, he writes, 'a world as rich as that of the *Thousand and One Nights* was revealed to me'.

So the question needs to be asked: why did Andersen become a completely original writer of fairy tales, and not simply a tradition bearer, giving his own creative twist to traditional material in a chain of transmission from one oral storyteller to another? As a pauper child in Odense, the oral folktale was his creative birthright.

Hans Christian Andersen lived at a time of great transition in European popular culture – a time when the dream of universal literacy transformed the basis of the old oral tradition. Free universal education was established in Denmark during his childhood, but even before then the ability to read and write was spreading. Andersen's mother was illiterate, but his shoemaker father could both read and write, and even owned books such as the *Thousand and One Nights* and some plays by Holbek from which he read to his young son. Independent shoemakers in that era tended to be freethinkers and radicals, and it may well have been Hans Andersen who insisted that Hans Christian should be educated, first at a Dame school, then at a school for Jewish boys (whose headmaster is Andersen's suspected abuser), and then – after an odd hiatus – at the Odense Poor School. How his parents found the money to pay for the first two schools is an unexplained mystery.

Whatever the solution to that, the result was that Hans Christian Andersen grew up venerating the written word, and dreaming of becoming a *digter* – a word which in Danish is a

more all-encompassing description of an imaginative writer than the narrower English term, poet. He writes in *The Fairytale of My Life* of visiting the house of Mrs Bunkeflod, the widow of a deceased clergyman and minor poet: 'Here it was that I heard for the first time the word *digter* spoken, and that with so much reverence as proved it to be something sacred ... "My brother the poet," said Bunkeflod's sister, and her eyes sparkled as she said it. From her I learned that it was a something glorious, a something fortunate, to be a poet.'

Andersen's imagination was nourished as he grew by both the spoken and the written word. Indeed, as his father both read him fairy tales from the *Arabian Nights* and almost certainly told him fairy tales from his own mental store, the young Hans Christian may hardly have distinguished between the two forms of narrative.

The extent to which the first literate generations of Northern European peasants assimilated the written word into the oral tradition is suggested by the following passage from the autobiography of the Finnish author Pietari Päivärinta, quoted in *The Narrative World of Finnish Fairy Tales* by Satu Apo. The setting is a farm kitchen in Ostrobothnia in Western Finland in the 1830s:

The woman's speech comforted me so much that I went back into the farm kitchen, where a cheerful fire was burning in the hearth and cheerful people were sitting round it doing their handwork and exchanging stories with their fellow travellers. There was mention of ghost stories, which seemed to please the listeners greatly.

I found myself sitting in a dark corner from which I could see and hear everything; I did not like the ghost stories at all, for I had once read a story called 'Women hasty in distress, men forgetful of danger' in an old edition of *Oulun Viikko-Sanomat* (the *Oulu Weekly Journal*) kept by one of my masters, and it had so enlightened me that I was able to look down on their ghost stories. Humble as I was, I did not dare disclaim their ideas and merely said I too knew a story, if they would care to hear it. "Tell us, tell us," called a voice from the group immediately, "beggar boys can often tell stories." This last statement struck me as somewhat degrading, but there was nothing for it, beggar boy as I was. In a piping, childish voice I began from my dark corner to narrate a treasured story I had only just learned; it was no everyday story; it told about the king, the money forgers, and how the light of truth pierced these rascals and so on. It made quite an impression

on the listeners: their axes ceased their tapping, their wheels their spinning, their cards their flicking, and all hung on my words: how would the story end?

When my story came to an end, the master of the household called out in glee: “That boy will either become a great master or a great fool, for he has a talent and a memory as good as an old horse’s.” —“I told you beggar boys are good at telling stories,” someone chipped in, as if to boast at his correct prediction. “But it wasn’t a tale,” said another. “Where did you hear that story?” he then asked me. “I read it,” I replied. —“Read it? Where?” came many a wondering, questioning voice. —“My master, Esa Kivioja, had a book where nothing was continued to the end; before the long bits ended, there were shorter ones in between, and whenever one broke off, it said ‘more later,’” I replied. —“What was the book called?” asked another. —“It said on every other page: *Oulun Viiko-Sanomia*, and you’ll never believe how exciting it was to read,” I explained, for I did not at that time understand much about the way newspapers were arranged. —“It’s a newspaper,” said another. —“Would it be possible to borrow one?” asked yet another. “Everything borrowed, there’s nothing but rubbish in the papers; better to read the word of God,” said yet another in the group.

There is so much in this passage that could be out of Andersen’s own story – even the downbeat ending, ‘There’s nothing but rubbish in the papers’, could come from any number of Andersen’s fairy tales. Think of the desolate last line of his very last story, ‘Auntie Toothache’: ‘Everything ends up in the rubbish.’

But like his Finnish counterpart, Andersen ended up not as a locally admired traditional storyteller, but as a nationally, in his case internationally, revered writer. And in the process, Hans Christian Andersen completely reinvented and reinvigorated the age-old literary heritage of the illiterate, the fairy tale.

The story of Andersen’s relations with the Brothers Grimm is relevant here. In 1844, when he was already a household name across Europe, he visited Berlin and called on the Grimms. He introduced himself to Jacob Grimm, but Jacob had no idea who he was, and Andersen was politely shown the door. Yet – such is the speed that stories pass in and out of the oral tradition – the Grimms had already inadvertently included a version of Andersen’s ‘The Princess on the Pea’ in the 1843 edition of *Household Tales*. You can tell it is Andersen’s story rather than a cognate version, because it repeats a change introduced by the story’s first German translator;

who placed three peas under the mattress rather than the single pea in the Danish original. The Grimms were embarrassed when they discovered their mistake, and dropped the story from all future editions.

In describing his use of folk materials, Andersen always says, as for instance with 'What Father Does Is Always Right', that the story is one 'that I heard as a child and have retold in my own way'. In a sense, he was taking no more license with his material than a traditional storyteller would, who also retells each story in his or her own way. But Andersen did go further than such storytellers, because he recast the stories in a completely different idiom, a written one where the cadences of the prose have to do all the work that in oral performance is shared by tone, gesture, inflection, and atmosphere.

Speaking of the first four tales, Andersen wrote to his friend, the poet B.S. Ingemann, 'I have given a few of the fairytales I myself used to enjoy as a child and which I believe aren't well known. I have written them completely as I would have told them to a child.'

That this is not the whole story is obvious as soon as one reads Edvard Collin's description of Andersen actually telling stories to children. 'The tale went on all the time, with gestures to match the situation. Even the driest sentence was given life. He didn't say, "The children got into the carriage and then drove away." No, he said, "They got into the carriage—"Goodbye, Dad! Goodbye, Mum!"—the whip cracked smack! smack! and away they went. Come on! Gee-up!"' In other words, when telling a fairy tale, Andersen acted it out. But when writing it on the page, that was not possible. He had to find another way.

We can trace the development of Andersen's particular style by looking at the two versions he published of the Danish folktale 'The Travelling Companion', which is a version of the international tale-type known as 'The Grateful Dead Man' (ATU 507A); the first written version of this is in the apocryphal *Book of Tobit*, the story of Tobias and the angel. Twenty-seven oral versions have been collected in Denmark.

'The Travelling Companion' was in fact the first fairy tale Andersen wrote. The first version was published in 1830 as 'The Dead Man: A Tale from Funen'. It is a highly literary version in the archly elaborate style of Musäus, whose fairy tales Andersen had read in the 1816 translations of Oehlenschläger. He recast it as 'The Travelling Companion' in 1836, once he had found his own storytelling style.

Folklorist Bengt Holbek makes an interesting comparison between the two versions. In the first, Andersen writes, 'The first night he lodged in a haystack in the field and slept there like a Persian prince in his glittering chamber.' Six years later, the same passage reads, 'The first night, he lay down to sleep in a haystack in the fields, for other bed had he none. But he thought it was just lovely—the king himself couldn't have a finer bed.' The literary allusions, flowery phrases, and convoluted syntax of the first version are swept away, and instead we hear the direct, intimate, colloquial voice that we recognise immediately as Andersen's own. Andersen keeps the structure of the oral tale, but makes additions, such as the puppet show, reflecting his own

interest in puppets and toy theatres. He incorporates the tale into his personal imaginative world, and makes it his own.

Even when retelling traditional tales such as 'The Travelling Companion', Andersen veers from traditional modes of narration. As Holbek puts it, 'A folklorist may express it this way: Andersen does not conform to Olrik's Epic Laws, according to which thoughts and feelings are expressed in action; he is free to diverge from tradition because he is not constrained by the conditions of oral storytelling.' In fact, Holbek concludes, 'Andersen does not understand what [folktales] are really about.'

The princess in 'The Travelling Companion' is, Holbek contends, 'a young woman who is under the spell of being attached to her father at a time when she should be ready for a husband instead'. The father appears in the tale in the guise of the Troll. Andersen does not appear to appreciate this underlying emotional structure, or if he does he disguises it so that it may no longer be discerned by the reader. Therefore, according to Holbek, 'Andersen may use the apparatus of the traditional tales, but instead of carrying the tradition on, he gives it a new direction, undoubtedly because he is transferring it to a new environment.'

This can be seen clearly in a story such as 'The Wild Swans', which Andersen based on a Danish folktale called 'The Eleven Swans' in Matthias Winther's pioneering collection of 1823, *Danske Folkeeventyr*. Andersen retells the story in his own style, reshaping it and adding descriptive details and symbolic elements as he sees fit. At the climax, for instance, when the innocence and goodness of the long-suffering Elise is proved by her brothers, who have been transformed back to human form from their swan shapes by her patient devotion, Elise is tied to a stake, about to be burned alive. As her eldest brother reveals the truth, a wonderful fragrance fills the air: 'For every piece of wood in the fire built around the stake had taken root, and sent forth branches, until they made a high hedge around Elise, full of red roses. At the very top there was a single pure white flower, bright as a shining star.' This transcendent imagery of flowers as the symbol of perfection is central to Andersen's vision. Similar passages can be found throughout his work. But it would be hard to find parallels in true folktales, in which flowers, because they wither and die, are more often symbols of death and decay.

And soon enough Andersen ceased to rely on traditional tales at all, as he settled into his own fairy-tale style. His first really important original tale was 'The Little Mermaid'. Published in 1837, in the third of his little booklets of tales, this long, tragic story was the one in which Andersen really made his mark on the fairy tale. The little mermaid's suffering, in her helpless devotion to the prince, appealed to the 19th-century taste for stories of female self-sacrifice. But it also embodies Andersen's personal fear of sex and sexuality, which is also reflected in his cruel story 'The Red Shoes', in which Karen's fate is not unlike the agony of the little mermaid as she dances across daggers.

'The Little Mermaid' does have roots in folk and literary tradition, most obviously in the 1811 fairy tale 'Undine' by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, in which the water sprite Undine

marries a human knight, Huldebrand, in order to gain a human soul. But Andersen makes the story completely his own, most particularly in his passionate identification with the little mermaid, whose amphibious nature reflects his own uncertain sexuality.

The story was very important to him. He worked hard at it – although the published story is fluent and confident, the manuscript is covered in alterations – and wrote to his friend, the poet Ingemann, 'The latest tale, "The Little Mermaid", is the only one of my works that has affected me while I was writing it ... I don't know how other writers feel! I suffer with my characters, I share their moods, whether good or bad, and I can be nice or nasty according to the scene on which I happen to be working.'

The tragic ending of 'The Little Mermaid' is repeated again and again in Andersen's fairy tales, which often end sadly, or with a sense of disappointment or disillusion. The story shows Andersen himself transmuting his own thwarted longing for love and fulfilment into a quest for immortality through art – a theme which had resonance for Oscar Wilde, who blended 'The Little Mermaid' with another Andersen tale, 'The Shadow', to create his own fairy-tale masterpiece, 'The Fisherman and His Soul'.

Holbek notes that in Andersen, 'The tales that are best constructed from an epic point of view are those he took from oral tradition and a few others, like "The Ugly Duckling" and "The Little Mermaid"', whereas the majority of his own tales consist of loosely connected series of vivid images; Andersen's talent is dramatic and lyrical rather than epic.'

This is true not only in the short, witty tales such as 'The Collar' or 'The Snail and the Rose Tree', but even in the long tale that I regard as Andersen's masterpiece, 'The Snow Queen'. The narrative flow is episodic in a way that owes much more to the theatre than to Danish traditional narrative. It is, as the subtitle tells us, 'A Story in Seven Parts'.

'The Snow Queen' was published in 1846. Unlike 'The Little Mermaid', this story was not laboured over; but written in an incredible burst of inspiration over a matter of days. 'It came out dancing over the paper,' he said. Andersen started it on the 5th of December, completed it on the 10th, and published it on the 21st. It is one of his most positive tales, affirming triumphantly that Love is stronger than Death. Of course, Gerda has to go through terrible suffering to free Kay from the clutches of the icy Snow Queen, but in the end she does succeed.

The wonderful images of this story stay with you your whole life. It is a tale essentially about the fall of man, identifying this with the transition from the innocence of childhood to the knowledge of adulthood. Kay is redeemed from the fall into adulthood by the innocent faith of the still-childish, pre-sexual Gerda.

When one looks at Andersen's great fairy tales, such as 'The Snow Queen', 'The Bell', or 'The Ugly Duckling', and compares them with the traditional tales that were his first models, one discovers that a fundamental change in the nature of the stories has taken place. Andersen's original fairy tales in fact resist interpretation or analysis by folkloric means. Vladimir Propp's celebrated structural analysis of the wonder tale, which reduces it to a series of 31 functions, always in the same sequential order, can be fruitfully applied to much longer works that use the

fairy-tale form – even Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* can be reduced to a string of Proppian functions. But Andersen's fairy tales, such as 'The Snow Queen', cannot. They operate more like poems than folktales.

Andersen did take two important elements of his fairy-tale style from the oral tale. The first is the concept of transformation, which lies at the heart of both the traditional fairy tale and of Andersen's literary ones. The second is the relaxed, intimate tone of voice that he uses, full of colloquialisms and asides. 'Listen! This is the beginning. And when we get to the end we shall know more than we do now.' 'Many years ago there was an emperor who was so mad about fashionable new clothes that he spent all his money on dressing up.' 'Once there were twenty-five soldiers, all brothers, because they were all made out of the same old tin spoon.'

This tone of voice is what Andersen found between his two versions of 'The Travelling Companion'. It is a way of mimicking orality in the written word, by distressing the surface of conventional prose to add homeliness and individuality. In his essay 'Elements of Orality in the Fairy Tales of H. C. Andersen', Manfred Menzel notes for instance how in his work, 'Andersen negligently mixes tenses, changing from simple past to present tense in order to create the impression of immediacy ... Andersen seems to suggest that the written text is a stop-gap which, like [printed] music, gives mere indications as to how it is supposed to sound.'

This style is vividly present even in those first four tales, such as 'The Princess on the Pea'. Already Andersen has understood that it is not so much the story that matters as the voice of the storyteller. He speaks directly to the reader: 'There was once a prince who wanted to marry a princess – only she must be a real princess. He went all over the world looking for one, but there was always something wrong. He found plenty of princesses, but were they real princesses? He couldn't quite tell.' His voice seems to step out of the book and into the room to tell his tale.

In her book *Interpreting Oral Narrative*, Anna-Leena Siikala divides traditional narrators into five basic types: the active narrator placing a distance between himself and tradition; the occasional narrator closely associating with tradition; the passive narrator who has internalised tradition; the active narrator who has internalised tradition; and the passive narrator placing a distance between himself and tradition. There is also, I believe, a sixth kind of narrator; one whose imagination is so suffused by story that the story world becomes a prism through which to view the everyday world in which we live. One such was the Hungarian storyteller Zsuzsanna Palkó. In a moving tribute to this great verbal artist in her book *Narratives in Society*, the folklorist Linda Dégh describes how Mrs Palkó, at the age of 74, 'encountered face-to-face the world of fulfillment of her tales'. This was when Mrs Palkó was summoned from her remote peasant community to Budapest, to be awarded the title Master of Folk Arts:

Throughout her stay in the city, she identified her tale concepts in real life, matching reality against the deeper, subjective truth. "This is where Little I Don't Know could have lived," she whispered.

“His palace is just like the one in which King Lajos was reared ... and, oh yes, there is the telephone, like the one the palace guard had at the gate when he reported to the king that a guest was arriving, but he didn't know if it was an emperor or a king ...” Mrs Palkó actually found reinforcement for her belief in the miraculous world of the tale by discovering and identifying experienced miracles of the city.

This is really not unlike Andersen's state of mind when he asked, 'Is it going to be for me as it was for Aladdin?' He knew what he was doing when he titled his autobiography *The Fairytale of My Life*.

Andersen was the first writer to adapt the storytelling techniques of the oral tradition to express the intimate secrets of his life and thoughts, and he did so because, like Mrs Palkó, the magical realities of the fairy-tale world provided him with the yardstick by which he measured his own real-life experience.

And in that experience, the magic was often sullied and spoiled by leering and grimacing reflections from the devil's distorting mirror; the one that smashes into evil splinters in 'The Snow Queen'. For instance, in his autobiography, Andersen makes much of the incident when, after he told his mother he wanted to go to Copenhagen to make his way in the world, rather than stay in Odense and become a tailor, she asked a wise woman to read his future in the coffee grounds. 'Your son will become a great man,' the wise woman said, 'and one day Odense will be illuminated in his honour.' In 1867, this prophecy came true. 'I stepped to the open window,' Andersen wrote. 'There was a blaze of light from the torches, the place was quite full of people. They sang, and I was overcome in my soul.' He was treated like a king.

But even at this height of achievement, Andersen could not be wholly happy. The great poet of human suffering was wracked with a terrible toothache. Instead of enjoying the crowd's song in his honour, he sneaked a look at the printed page, 'to see how many verses there were to be before I could slip away from the torture which the cold air sent through my teeth'.

The way his life's finest moment is undercut by pain and disappointment reflects the balance in his fairy tales between enchantment and disenchantment – a fine balance that no other writer has ever achieved. And yet, despite the gloomy conclusion of 'Auntie Toothache' that 'Everything ends up in the rubbish', Andersen did keep faith with the fairy tale, and it kept faith with him.

Another of his last tales is usually entitled 'The Cripple', but I prefer the less sentimental title Andersen used when he sent the tale to Horace Scudder, 'The Book of Fairytales'. It tells the story of a poor boy, crippled with illness and confined to bed, who is given the present of a book of fairy tales. He reads two of these to his parents – versions of the folktales 'The Happy Man's Shirt' and 'The Mouse in the Silver Dish' – and these two tales with their simple morals are enough for his parents, but not for Hans, the son. 'Hans read

the whole book time and again, for the tales took him out into the world, where his legs couldn't carry him.'

In many ways this is what his own fairy tales did for Hans Christian Andersen – they took him out into the world, where his legs couldn't carry him. All the things that made his life so difficult – his conflicted sexuality, his dyslexia, his social awkwardness, his hypochondria, his hypersensitivity, his morbid fears, his crippling lack of self-confidence and balancing unshakeable belief in his destiny for greatness – could be transmuted in the fairy tales into something magical and meaningful.

One of Andersen's greatest stories, 'The Bell', written in 1845, is a supreme example of this. It dramatises in fairy-tale form Andersen's persisting fantasy that, like the ugly duckling, the reason why he didn't feel at home in the duck yard was because he was hatched from a swan's egg. Andersen's childish imagination cast himself in the same scenario as Aladdin in Oehlenschläger's play; he was, he told his first school friend, a switched child of noble birth.

Plenty of children console themselves with fantasies of this kind; what is unusual in Andersen's case is that there is plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest it might possibly be true. The unusual pattern of royal patronage that underpins Andersen's life story adds weight to the theory – championed first by Jens Jørgensen and more recently by Rolf Dorset – that Hans Christian Andersen was the illegitimate son of Countess Elise Ahlefeldt-Laurvig by Crown Prince Christian Frederik, the future King Christian VIII. Without going into the whole story here, it is notable in the context of 'The Bell' that when in 1816 the Crown Prince and his family moved to Odense Castle, because Christian Frederik had been made governor of Funen, the young Hans Christian Andersen was often taken to the castle by his washerwoman mother to play with the young Prince Frits (later King Frederik VII), who was three years his junior. This pauper boy had no playmates on the street; only a royal prince in a castle.

Although Andersen tells this story in his early memoirs, privately written for a friend, when he came to write *The Fairytale of My Life* he makes no mention of it – an odd omission for someone as vain as he was. But the closeness with Frits continued into adulthood. After he became king, Frits treated Hans Christian as an old friend. He liked to hear Andersen tell his fairy tales, and once asked him, 'How can you think up all these things? How does it all come to you? Have you got it all inside your head?' When Frits died, Andersen was the only non-family member allowed a private visit to the king's body in its coffin.

Andersen looks back at this unlikely childhood friendship in 'The Bell', which tells the story of two boys who search for the source of a great bell that sounds through the forest. One is a pauper, the other a king's son (always *en Kongesøn*, never *en Prins*). Although they take different routes, one in sunshine and one in shadow, in the end they arrive at the same place and embrace like brothers: 'The two boys ran to each other and held hands in the great cathedral of nature and poetry. Above them rang the invisible sacred bell, and blessed spirits hovered and danced around them to a jubilant "Hallelujah!"'

'The Bell' is set specifically in the time of Andersen's first friendship with Prince Frits, in 1819, the year Andersen was confirmed, and it seems likely that he was thinking of this when shaping the tale. A bone-dry joke in Andersen's diary on 3 January 1875, the last year of his life, suggests that by this time he had fully assimilated the idea that he might be Frits's older brother. Noting how many letters he has received, he writes, 'One has my name and address: King Christian the Ninth.'

But the import of 'The Bell' is not that the pauper has been cheated of his birthright, or that the king's son has an unfair advantage. It is that it really doesn't matter if you are a pauper or a king's son; if your heart is true, you will achieve your goal. The old baroness in Andersen's 1848 novel *The Two Baronesses* says much the same thing: 'We are all of one piece—all made from the same clod of earth; one came in a newspaper wrapping, another in gold paper, but the clod should not be proud of that. There is nobility in every class; but it lies in the mind, not in the blood, for we are also of one blood, whatever they may say.'

All the same, this strange back-story gives new meaning to what Andersen wrote about 'The Bell'. He said: 'This, like nearly all of my later fairy tales and stories, was wholly original. They lay in my mind like seeds and only needed a gentle touch—the kiss of a sunbeam or a drop of bitterness—to flower.'

As Dinah Birch wrote in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 2005, speaking of the tale 'The Collar', which ends with the boastful collar being turned into rags that are turned into the very paper on which the story is printed, 'Andersen understands that stories must be constructed from your own ignoble substance.'

It's me the story is about.

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Neil Philip

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The website of the Hans Christian Andersen Center, www.andersen.sdu.dk, is an exceptionally rich and flexible resource; among much else it contains a modern English translation of 'Lucky Peer' by Jean Hersholt. There is a very full Links section with links to other websites with material on Andersen.